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SUBJECT: THE GVN REPORTS ON TWO YEARS OF THE NEW FRAMEWORK ON
RELIGION

REF: 06 Hanoi 582

Summary

1. (SBU) On February 1, the GVN issued its second report on the implementation of its new framework on religion. Comments at the official unveiling were largely desultory, though the GVN did make an unusual acknowledgement that it has faced difficulties implementing its policies at the local level. The report itself is silent on many sensitive aspects of religious practice here and almost completely ignores the influence and importance of unofficial religious groups. It is also weak on hard details concerning developments since the promulgation of the new framework on religion, but builds on recent GVN efforts to establish that religion is a traditional, constructive and necessary part of Vietnamese society. The unusually matter-of-fact treatment of Protestantism may reflect a more nuanced GVN approach on this issue, and may bode well for continued movement in this area. We will continue to monitor closely the registration of Protestant congregations across the country, with a particular emphasis on the Northwest Highlands. End Summary.

Presentation

2. (SBU) On February 1, the GVN's Committee on Religious Affairs presented its second "White Paper on Religious Freedom" to members of the international press and the diplomatic community (the report's full 96-page text is available at www.vietnamembassy.us as a .pdf file). Comments made by MFA Spokesman Le Dzung and CRA Chairman Ngo Yen Thi largely dealt with the drafting mechanics of the report; however, in response to a question posed by the BBC, Thi acknowledged that the GVN has had difficulty implementing the new framework on religion at the district level in remote parts of the country. He stated that "implementation (of religious laws) is a practical question in many countries, and Vietnam is attempting to address its development gap through providing substantial training and workshops." In the last three years, the CRA has conducted over 3,000 training courses and 10,000 training workshops to instruct officials at the local level in the new policy, Thi added.

Introduction

3. (SBU) Compared with last year's report (reftel), the 2006 white paper takes a much more historical approach to its subject. The report's introduction states that "Vietnam is committed to respecting and safeguarding the citizens' effective right to freedom of belief and religion, and at the same time constantly improves the legal system related to belief and religion to meet the citizens' basic spiritual and religious needs while simultaneously promoting the strength and great unity of the entire nation and building the country so that Vietnam becomes increasingly more developed, democratic, equitable, and cultured." The report goes on to note,

"however, both inside and outside of the country, because of inadequate information and certain prejudices, there are those who do not yet have a complete and accurate understanding of the situation of religion and the State's policies on religion in Vietnam." The CRA adds that the report is intended to help readers, researchers and those interested inside and outside of the country so that they have a clearer understanding about the situation of religion in Vietnam and about the Vietnamese State's policies on religion."

Chapter I - Religious History

¶4. (SBU) Chapter I is a long dissertation on the history of religion in Vietnam, which is notable mainly for the CRA's effort to demonstrate that religious believers of all stripes have contributed to the defense of Vietnamese independence and unity throughout the centuries.

Buddhism

¶5. (SBU) The section on Buddhism includes a long description of the development of the officially recognized Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha (VBS). Its revisionist historical approach implies that the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) was a faction of the southern branch of the VBS, which separated in 1964 for the purpose of exploitation by foreigners for political purposes. "However, the majority of the clergy and followers remained loyal to the nation, were patriotic, and participated in the liberation of the South and in national unification," the CRA adds. The report makes no further mention of the UBCV.

Catholicism

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¶6. (SBU) In the section on Catholicism, the report largely glosses over the 1954-1975 period, but acknowledges that "during the process of evangelization and Church development in Vietnam, Catholicism contributed to the enrichment of Vietnamese culture: with the distinctive architectural designs of its churches...festivals, such as Noel and the La Vang Festival in Quang Tri Province in Central Vietnam...display the country's fine cultural attributes."

Islam

¶7. (SBU) The section on Islam is concerned chiefly with explaining the dogmatic and doctrinal differences between the two main divisions among Cham Muslim believers in the southern part of the country.

Protestantism

¶8. (SBU) The section on Protestantism begins with an explicit acknowledgment that, "after the Geneva Agreement (1954), Protestantism developed differently in the North and the South," and that "the majority of followers and clergy in the North fled to the South." There remained only about 1,000 followers and a dozen pastors and preachers in the North in 1954. Between 1954 and 1975, the evangelical Christian Missionary Alliance "took advantage of the political situation in the South...to advance its missionary work by investing money, providing facilities, and sending clergy to help the Vietnamese General Confederation of Evangelical Churches...build up an organizational system and expand its religious, economic, and social establishments," especially in ethnic communities in the Central Highlands.

¶9. (SBU) The report further asserts that, "after the liberation of the South," the religious establishments of the Southern Evangelical Church (SECV), the Seventh-Day Adventists, United World Mission, Baptists and some other denominations were allowed to operate as

usual. However, the GVN "did not yet accept the legal status of the Southern Church for several reasons, including the fact that some Protestants, especially those in the Central Highlands, were allied with reactionaries from FULRO (Front Unifie de Lutte des Races Opprimees - the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races)." (Note: FULRO was the ethnic minority separatist group that conducted an armed guerilla campaign against GVN control of the Central Highlands from 1975 to 1992. End Note.)

Cao Dai

¶10. (SBU) The report explains the rise of the Cao Dai in the latter portion of the 19th century as a peasant reaction to repressive economic policies. It ignores the present political discord within the Cao Dai community, but acknowledges some of the dogmatic differences. "During resistance wars against foreign aggression, a majority of leaders and adherents of the various Cao Dai sects actively assisted the revolution and contributed their efforts and wealth to the cause of national liberation and unification," the report notes.

Hoa Hao

¶11. (SBU) The report explains the rise of the Hoa Hao as a reaction to French reprisals against the 1940 uprising in An Giang Province. There is no mention of current religious or political disputes within Hoa Hao.

Chapter II - Religious Developments

¶12. (SBU) Following its lengthy historical section, the white paper outlines the development of the GVN's policies on religion. It concludes with the April 2006 10th Party Congress resolution on religion, which states that "followers of different religions are an integral part of Vietnam's great national unity...The Party consistently implements policies of respect and guarantees the people's right to freedom of belief, the right of citizens to follow or not to follow a religion, and the right to take part in normal religious activities according to the law...It encourages development of cultural values and strong ethics of religions." The Congress recommended that "constructive programs in socio-economic development should be implemented to improve the material and cultural lives of religious followers; training and upgrading of cadre dealing with religious affairs should be enhanced; superstitious activities and behaviors that take advantage of belief and religion in order to harm the common welfare of the country or

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to violate the citizens' freedom of religion should be prevented," the report states.

¶13. (SBU) There is an extensive explanation of the current legal framework on religion, including the Ordinance on Religion and Belief and the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism. Both are broken down in detail, addressing in familiar terms issues like the transfer and training of clergy and the registration of congregations.

Implementation of the New Framework

¶14. (SBU) The report claims that there have been a number of developments in the GVN's religion policies over the last 20 years, including 1) recognition of 16 religious organizations emanating from six religions to operate in accordance with the detailed framework of the law, 2) growth in the training of religious clergy (i.e., the VBS has three institutes, six colleges and 31 intermediate training schools that have trained 5,090 Buddhist monks and nuns; the Catholic Church has six seminaries and 1,236 Catholic priests; and the SECV has two training courses for 150 trainees) and 3) publication of several million religious books. The report also stresses that in 2006, the Tu An Hieu Nghia, Tinh Do Cu Si Phat Hoi and the Missionary Christian Church organizations were granted

certificates for operational registration of religious activities and will soon be recognized as organizations, 2) the SECV inaugurated construction of a new Institute of Bible and Theology in Ho Chi Minh City in August, 3) Buddha's 2550th Birthday was celebrated to honor the 25th anniversary of the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha and 4) the Religious Publishing House printed 130 new religious titles in the first six months of the year.

Registrations

¶15. The report states that two years after the promulgation of the new framework, religious activities of Protestant followers in the Central Highlands have "received due attention and their rights have been guaranteed according to provisions of the law." Some 718 SECV places of worship have registered and 67 congregations have been recognized and are engaged in regular activities. Also, 71 SECV pastors and newly appointed pastors have been recognized. The report also asserts that in the Northwest Highlands, "local governments have created favorable conditions for Protestants to practice their religion at home and have developed guidelines for religious assembly groups to register their activities with local authorities." In all, 27 Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) "assembly groups" in nine provinces received pilot registrations in ¶2006. The report asserts that this pilot program was "a necessary step to avoid possible contradictions and complications in families and clans that might negatively affect the stable life of ordinary people," but states that "results secured in the provinces...of northern Vietnam have guided and will continue to guide religious people and assembly groups to register their religious activities in accordance with the Prime Minister's Instruction."

Commitment to National Unity

¶16. (SBU) Chapter II concludes with a lengthy section that further expounds on individual religions' contributions to the unity and independence of Vietnam,

Chapter III - Foreign Relationships

¶17. (SBU) Chapter III relates developments in the relationship between Vietnam's individual religious organizations and foreign organizations and exchanges of delegation, as well as the GVN's own relations with foreign organizations and exchanges with governments, academia and religious organizations. The Chapter does not address relationships with religious organizations outside Vietnam.

Statistical Appendices

¶18. (SBU) The report concludes with an extended list of statistics on each religion in Vietnam. The CRA states that there are ten million Buddhists, 5.9 million Catholics, 2.27 million Cao Dai, 1.2 million Hoa Hao, 500,000 Southern Protestants, 110,000 Northern Protestants and 66,695 Muslims in the country.

Comment

¶19. (SBU) As with last year's report, the 2006 White Paper on Religion is silent on many sensitive aspects of religious belief in Vietnam. The report almost completely ignores the influence and

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importance of the UBCV, as well as the schisms in the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao churches. Furthermore, the CRA's estimates of the number of believers belonging to each organization in the country are much lower than most independent observations. The report is also surprisingly weak on hard details concerning developments since the promulgation of the new framework on religion. That said, the report is interesting for its attempt to provide a historical background for most of the issues surrounding religion, especially its efforts to show that all important religions have served the causes of Vietnamese independence and national unity - in essence, a

refutation of past Party beliefs that religions are anti-revolutionary. In this sense, the report builds on recent GVN efforts to establish that religion is a traditional, constructive and necessary part of Vietnamese society.

¶20. (SBU) Of particular note is the CRA's unusually matter-of-fact explication of the rise of Protestantism in South Vietnam after most northern Protestants fled there in 1954. This may reflect a more nuanced GVN approach on this issue resulting from the international community's perceived focus on Protestantism in the last year, which may bode well for continued movement in this area. We are also encouraged that the CRA's estimate of the number of ethnic minority Protestants in the northern Vietnam is not far below the northern church's own estimates, and that the CRA publicly acknowledges the difficulties it has encountered in enforcing the GVN's policies in this region. We will continue to monitor closely the registration of Protestant congregations across Vietnam, with a particular emphasis on the north. End comment.

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